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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: RUSSIA PREPARES FOR A KOSOVO COLLISION

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns
for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: In recent weeks, Russia has dug a deeper line in the sand on Kosovo. Putin recently reaffirmed Russia's "extremely clear" position that Kosovo's status must be negotiated and will serve as a "precedent" for other conflicts. Russia's differences with us remain largely principled, with its policy driven by Putin personally, and enjoying domestic political support that the election season has heightened. Russia seeks continued delay, at the same time that it builds a legal case for employing the Kosovo precedent in the wake of a CDI, despite a host of good reasons to avoid doing so. We can expect Russian countermeasures in the UN and other international fora, acceptance of a soft partition of Kosovo, acceptance and perhaps encouragement of Dodik troublemaking, and a series of steps that lead up to -- and could, over time, include -- diplomatic recognition of Abkhazia. Pushing back the timing of CDI beyond the early March Russian presidential elections, ensuring EU unity, keeping China on the sidelines, and sending a strong private message on Georgian territorial integrity will help manage the trainwreck, although the damage to the public perceptions of the U.S. will be real. End Summary.

Kosovo Remains a Red-line for Russia

¶2. (C) As preparations for Kosovo's coordinated declaration of independence (CDI) gain momentum, senior Russian officials have taken every opportunity to re-state its position that negotiations should continue on Kosovo's status and that those negotiations should remain within the framework of the UN. Immediately prior to the formal conclusion of Troika negotiations, FM Lavrov used Serbian FM Jeremic's visit to highlight Moscow-Belgrade solidarity on the imperative of a negotiated solution on Kosovo and to cast all the blame for the failure of the Troika negotiations on the U.S. and its European allies. Since the conclusion of Troika talks, FM Lavrov warned in a December 22 interview that Russia would veto any non-negotiated UNSCR on Kosovo, "not to create problems, but to use the mechanism given to it after World War II to prevent major global conflicts." On January 16, the day of the UNSC discussion of the UNMIK report, President Putin released a press article reaffirming Russia's "extremely clear position" that the solution to Kosovo's status must be determined through negotiations and will become a "precedent" for unresolved conflicts elsewhere.

Difficulties in Engaging with Russia on Kosovo

¶3. (C) It has become increasingly difficult to imagine how we can influence Russia's unwavering position on Kosovo.

Russia's recalcitrance on Kosovo is explained by several factors:

-- Principles, Along With Petulance: Russia clearly enjoys its newfound ability to block U.S. foreign policy initiatives, but Russia does not view Kosovo as simply another opportunity to settle a score with the U.S. Russia firmly believes that the West's recognition of CDI is, as many senior officials and analysts here tell us, opening Pandora's Box and will cause "unimaginable consequences." DFM Karasin said in a January 10 interview that the future of international law is at stake: Kosovo is really about self-determination versus territorial integrity, and if the international community decides that territorial integrity takes precedence, this principle should "govern the resolution of some 200 territories seeking some form of self-determination."

-- Strong Domestic Backing: Putin enjoys virtually unanimous support from the political establishment to maintain a tough position on Kosovo. Senator Hagel's January 15-16 meetings with sympathetic Duma and Federation Council leaders, as well as with liberal civil society and business representatives, underscored the strong feeling even among liberals that the West is wrong to support independence now.

-- Electoral Dynamic: The March 2 presidential elections are only weeks away and Russian leaders will continue to highlight Russia's resurgence on the world stage and its ability to stand up to perceived U.S. unilateralism, a view which is widely shared among the elite and electorate alike.

-- Putin's Tight Grip on Kosovo Policy: The MFA is clearly not driving Russia's Kosovo policy. Lavrov and his team, with their emphasis on a "legal response" to CDI, are outflanked by the Presidential Administration and the special services, whose murky business/professional ties to Abkhazia are real but hard to define.

Russian Reaction to CDI

¶4. (C) Although Russian leaders fully recognize that Kosovo's independence is inevitable, the GOR will continue its efforts to keep the issue in the UNSC and use the UN to further delay the CDI. When Kosovo does declare its independence, Putin, Lavrov, and others have stressed in recent weeks that Russia will respond in strict accordance with international law. Given Russia's relentless efforts to establish a clear link between Kosovo and other conflicts, Russia is setting up a legal justification for its recognition of Abkhazia, which it may or may not decide to employ.

¶5. (C) There are compelling reasons for Russia not to act on Kosovo as a precedent -- the implications for future secessionist disputes in Russia, the possibility of destabilizing the neighborhood (the Armenian lobby in Moscow over Nagorno-Karabakh is substantial), and Russia's isolation on this issue -- but the rational actor model may not apply with respect to Abkhazia. Putin will face immediate and strong pressure at home and from the separatist regions in Georgia and Moldova to respond in kind to the West's recognition of Kosovo's independence, and the neuralgia over Russia's inability in the late 1990s to prevent the NATO bombings in Serbia is almost palpable here. While Putin will likely pocket the "Kosovo precedent" at the outset, we cannot rule out a move to recognize Abkhazia in the longer term.

¶6. (C) Aside from recognition of Abkhazia, the GOR has at its disposal a number of other, less incendiary gambits, which include:

-- UN/OSCE: Russia will forcefully condemn the CDI, put pressure on the UNSYG to issue a Presidential Statement calling for continued negotiations, deny Kosovo representation in international organizations, refute the

applicability of UNSCR 1244 as the basis for authorizing a ESDP mission to Kosovo, and halt OMIK. The GOR could also support an ICJ referral by Serbia, although we have not heard this specifically mentioned.

-- Balkans: The GOR will support a soft partition of Kosovo (while we have not heard talk of a scenario whereby Russian peacekeepers are invited by the Serbs, we cannot rule it out) and support the sovereign right of Serbia to exercise control over the Serb-dominated areas. The GOR can quietly encourage troublemaking by Dodik in Republika Srpska, while publicly proclaiming its support for Dayton Accord principles. Russia has been on record since last year for an end to the Office of the High Representative in June 2008.

-- Caucasus: In the immediate aftermath, Russian may elevate diplomatic meetings with representatives of the frozen conflicts, announce additional infrastructure or economic investment projects, intensify distribution of Russian citizenship to residents, jettison any efforts to rein in or replace South Ossetian President Kokoity, and in general, develop ties along the lines of the U.S.-Taiwan model.

Managing Russian Reaction

17. (C) Given the range and importance of U.S.-Russia relations, we have little leverage over Russian actions, particularly with respect to Abkhazia. The Russians do not find our arguments that Kosovo is unique persuasive and will not be deterred by unspecified consequences. Among the levers available, they are unlikely to believe that steps toward (or including) diplomatic recognition are sufficient to jeopardize the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, they remain confident in the status of their peacekeepers, and they are unabashed about their open efforts to increase citizenship and infrastructure ties to the frozen areas.

18. (C) Accordingly, the U.S. should consider the following steps:

-- Push Back CDI: A move towards CDI before the March 2 presidential elections likely will exacerbate the Russian response, although that response will be tough in any event.

-- Ensure EU unity: The Russians have questioned EU solidarity on this issue, and it is important that recognition of a CDI include the vast majority of European countries along with the U.S. At a minimum, the coordinated recognition should include the European powers that Russia cares about most -- France, Germany, and Italy.

-- Keep China on the Sidelines: China's disengagement on Kosovo reinforces the GOR's relative isolation.

-- Coordinate Strong Message on Abkhazia: The U.S. and especially key EU players (i.e., Germany and France) should deliver a strongly worded private message to the Russians reinforcing international rejection of a Kosovo precedent and Russian isolation in the event of a tit-for-tat recognition.

Comment

19. (C) The long-term impact of our fundamentally different approaches to Kosovo on the U.S.-Russia bilateral relationship will be significant, resurrecting many neuralgic moments of the 1999 standoff and reinforcing the charges of U.S. unilateralism, already intensified by the Russian political campaign season.

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